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Actor Training and Techniques in Pieśń Kozła Theatre

Anna Zubrzycki

The [Pieśń Kozła \(Song of the Goat\) Theatre](#) was established in 1996 in Wrocław, Poland by [Grzegorz Bral](#) and [Anna Zubrzycki](#)—both former long-standing members of the [Gardzience Theatre](#). The company continues a long tradition of ensemble avant-garde theatre companies in Poland who search for new training techniques that enable actors to transcend creative responses that have become habitual and use a new language to express their art on stage. This particular theatre tradition could be said to have its beginnings in [Meyerhold](#)'s work in Russia in the 1920s and in Poland it has produced such diverse and rich offspring as the work of [Jerzy Grotowski](#), [Tadeusz Kantor](#), and the Gardzience Theatre.

Pieśń Kozła belongs to the genre of what is now termed “physical theatre,” but the company sees itself as being a theatre of poetry and metaphors. Performances are devised by the ensemble under the direction of Grzegorz Bral and are the creative result of the company's training. The basis of this training lies in understanding both performer and performance in terms of polyphony—of sounds, texts, acts, and movement. Inspiration for this polyphony of actions has been found, in the first instance, in traditional cultures where song is not just a piece of music but has its roots in a deeper meaning. It belongs to a system of signs, metaphors, legends, and the history of a particular group of people. Traditional cultures offer a homogeneous picture of the world contained in a song, a dance, a ritual, or a story. Another, more contemporary inspiration is the image of an orchestra where the instruments interweave and link their complex individual lines of music, in order to create one common symphony. Musicality is at the heart of Pieśń Kozła's work.

Using this approach of polyphony, Pieśń Kozła's training is based on an understanding that there is a synthesis between all the particular acting tools that performers have at their disposal. To achieve this synthesis the company refers to the principle of coordination—that everything in a performance is linked, and that there is a direct flow between how we think, speak, and act. Synchronicity, timing, and listening all function in traditional cultural forms and are also basic terms used within Pieśń Kozła's training process. The work is, above all, that of an ensemble, so that even in moments where one actor may play a “leading role,” he or she is always in coordination with the rest of the ensemble and serves the greater meaning of this given moment. Furthermore, if we were to deconstruct any one of a Pieśń Kozła actor's “actions” within a moment of performance, we would see that it involves a very complex series of techniques and exercises as well as a particular attitude of awareness and “listening” to the synchronicity of everything occurring in that moment.

Since there is also coordination between the content of the performances and how this is expressed through the physical and vocal acts within it, the training process for each of the company's performances has a different outward manifestation (movement, text presentation, musical base). Yet it is always recognizably Pieśń Kozła's work because it is based on certain principles which give it its individuality.



Student presentation of Teatr Pieśń Kozła's MA class of 2009–10. Photo by Arkadiusz Susidko.

These principles guiding the training allow for its great flexibility and adaptation and not only provide the tools for its actors to devise their performances, but also a very extensive pedagogical program—workshops and master classes, as well as the M.A. in Acting that Pieśń Kozła conducted biannually at its studio in Poland with Manchester Metropolitan University in the U.K. The company is currently in the process of setting up an M.A. collaboration due to begin in 2014 with Rose Bruford College in London, England. The training has also successfully found a place in workshops the company runs for nonactors—for people interested in exploring their creativity and opening themselves up to experiencing their voices and physicality in new ways, as well as in projects with children and workshops that integrate various communities experiencing exclusion such as the mentally disempowered or the Roma community. The company also runs the [“Brave Festival—Against Cultural Exile,”](#) which is a forum for traditional artists from all over the world to present their performance art forms and to inspire others with the living traditions they still embody.

There are several precepts which guide the training work.

The first notion is that of coordination. This is the fundamental level of the training that seeks ways to facilitate connecting the actor's tools—text, song, rhythm, physicality, spatial relations—with partners on stage, the meaning of the text with the truth of the gesture, and so on. For example, Pieśń Kozła works a lot with the rhythm of the text in relation to the rhythm of the feet or the song. Very often actors are asked to “sing or speak from their feet.” This means that their head and throat (and thus the text or song) should not be in isolation from the rest of their body. Training this connection through many different exercises liberates performers from an intellectual, psychological interpretation of the text and opens their imagination into new ways of connecting to a “hidden meaning” within the text. This field of coordination may be further opened up with the text relating to the melody of a song sung by other performers—the text is then spoken and felt differently because it has a new, unexpected point of reference. Again, the text may be coordinated with the spatial relationships to all partners on stage.



Songs of Lear. Photo by Karol Jarek.

All the above aspects may also be coordinated simultaneously. In *Pieśń Kozła* performances this results in what audiences experience as an “organic way of singing and moving.”

Another very important connection to make is that the intention of a given moment in relation to a partner is truthfully expressed in the body. This is explored through exercises that first let the actor experience and accept the force of an impulse from his/her partner and then respond to it “adequately” – not interpreting it, not exaggerating the physical response, not filtering it through his/her own concept of what s/he thinks it should be. This is very hard work as it requires connecting intention, physical response, and emotional truth, and, when text is added, for the voice to be open and alive. There are endless ways of eliciting this from performers according to their needs and thus the training then becomes a very individual process.

A key aspect of this level of training is ensemble work—the clarity of the relationship between performers on the stage and acknowledging that their processes are all interconnected. One gesture from one actor is like a pebble thrown into a lake whose ripples fan out over the water. That gesture, that intention, is absolutely acknowledged and reacted to by each and every one of his/her fellow performers individually and yet in harmony with the whole group. The search for perfecting this has resulted in audiences seeing *Pieśń Kozła*’s performances as though they were watching one organism on stage. Like an orchestra in harmony.

The next level of training involves learning how any and/or all of the actors’ tools may be interchangeable in order to best express the content of any one moment in a performance. *Pieśń Kozła* actors train this ability to switch with complete clarity and ease from song to text to rhythm . . . depending on what is needed. This also involves the difficult quest of giving space for “impulses” to arise in order for this switching ability to occur.



Songs of Lear. Photos by Karol Jarek.

A key word here is “listening.” One must learn to listen with one’s whole self—exercises that teach this show the performer how to listen deep inside him/herself in order to “catch” the moment of impulse occurring and at the same time to be open to everything around him/her. Perfecting this ability allows for very surprising and, above all, true reactions to the very subtle series of impulses occurring both within and outside the performer. The word “listen” is used rather than “hear” since the latter involves the danger of interpretation and filtering. When something is said, then each person hears it differently and we all remember our own truth of what was said. But being simply immersed in the *act of listening* involves a constant openness and being here and now in the moment. Developing this ability through practicing it constantly both in specific exercises as well as in performance gives Pieśń Kozła actors a spontaneity and truth in their acting that goes hand in hand with the truth of who they are as human beings. Laughter is true laughter, tears are truly there, anger is absolute and unforgiving—all the gamut of human emotions may emerge and play like shooting stars in a summer night sky. And the performers’ engagement in listening to their own process as much as to others’ allows them to move from one situation to the next without getting bogged down in “psychological” acting that ultimately could imprison them in stereotypical reactions and sentimental performances. Each moment is true and when released immediately gives rise to the next true moment.

The exercises that the company has devised over the years give each performer the chance to find a very individual way to express him/herself during performance according to his/her talents. The aim of the Pieśń Kozła technique is ultimately for the performers to so perfect their mastery of their tools and their coordination of them that when they perform, an invisible, “additional,” almost celestial quality is released, much as when we hear a group of polyphonic singers who achieve a subtlety and mastery of their songs and thus evoke an “extra” sound, or “overtone.”

Over the past sixteen years the company has devised five performances. Each performance is a year or longer in rehearsal, and then the performances themselves are performed for several years. There are usually three stages in this process. First is research into new tools to express each play—songs, movement, and ways into the text. This involves searching for a homogeneous landscape training which will allow the actors devising the piece the ability to access new ways of expressing the content of the performance. Then these tools are interconnected as the performance is structured from etudes and moments of training. Finally the performance is shown to the public and then achieves its final form in relation to the presence of the audience. As the performance is played over a period of years it too undergoes a slow transformation and thus many audience members have returned to watch performances ten, twenty, or even more, times. Each evening seems to be different although the outer form is seemingly the same. It is indeed as though they were coming to hear the same orchestra perform the same symphony with many new improvisations and innuendoes within the same score.

The company’s first performance was called [Song of the Goat](#) (in Greek *tragon ode*—the root for the word “tragedy”). This title then remained the name of the company. The performance was based on Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Since the company was very young the performance was a training experience for many members who had only just begun their acting career. The tools for the training were very simple—dances from the Pontos region of Greece and live instrumental music and polyphonic songs from Greece, Serbia, and Macedonia. The company was not only searching for ways to incorporate this music and dances into the Euripides text, but also for them to be so deeply embedded in the performers’ bodies and imaginations that they became the “tool” which expressed the content of the play. The actors learned a very ancient and set form—their musicality and physicality became part of a common centuries-old cultural experience that, when practiced, gave them the chance to experience themselves in a new way and yet move very individualistically within it. Obviously they were not Greek dancers or singers, nor did they aspire to be, but they learned these songs and dances from their source, and when the experience and techniques were deep enough, the actors allowed their individuality to inform the different “etudes” within the play and it became a very contemporary piece of theatre. Above all, the training released a natural vitality and life into the performers. This is still the aim of the Pieśń Kozła’s training.



Chronicles – A Lamentation. Photo by Arkadiusz Chruściel.



Chronicles – A Lamentation. Photos by Arkadiusz Chruściel.

The next performance, *Chronicles – A Lamentation*, was based on the ancient Sumerian tale of *Gilgamesh*. It explored a particular moment of loss and death within the story. The main axis of the movement and music were the lamentations of the region of Albania which was once part of Ancient Greece—Epiros. The vocal structure of the lamentations was directly reflected in the staging of the play. In these traditional lamentations voices are described as being “the one who weaves,” “the one who takes,” “the one who perches,” and “the drone.” This musical structure was then reflected in the staging of the performance. The vocal arrangement became a spatial arrangement—the protagonist of any one scene was always in a specific vocal and spatial relation to his/her partner and their acting became very much within the genre of the protagonist and chorus of Ancient Greek theatre. Since the songs and singing were the tapestry upon which the play was woven, the physical expression of the actors directly reflected this relationship. It was music that defined the timing, the rhythm—indeed all the elements of the performance were first and foremost expressed in it. This was when the “coordination” aspect of the training was really developed.



Lacrimosa. Photo by Krzysztof Bieliński.



Lacrimosa. Photo by Krzysztof Bieliński.

Whereas the music was the axis around which *Chronicles* revolved, Pieśń Kozła's next performance, [*Lacrimosa*](#), was based on Andrzej Szczypiorski's [*Mass for Arras*](#), a novel written in Poland in the 1970s that investigates totalitarianism and is based around a true series of events in the French city of Arras, which during the fifteenth century suffered a devastating series of plagues. In its search for a means to express what it is to be "possessed" by power and xenophobia, the company devised a physical training form which was the cohesive device around which the performance built. The company investigated and visited the ancient *Anestenaria* (fire-walking) cult in Northern Greece. The quality of those ecstatic impulses of the Greek firewalkers and their unrelenting rhythms found their way into *Lacrimosa* together with excerpts of Mozart's *Requiem*.

The next performance the company worked on was Shakespeare's [*Macbeth*](#), which Pieśń Kozła performed in English. The field of investigation was the spoken word, the musicality of Shakespeare's poetry, and an attempt to give space for the words to "sound" within a quite dynamic physical score. There was a real effort to find a balance between the elements of music, song, movement, and words. Whereas in previous performances, the musical or physical score gave the actors a jumping off point for improvisation and devising scenes, and thus defined the form of the performance, this time the drama itself and Shakespeare's words were the driving force of Pieśń Kozła's *Macbeth*. Of course this was still continued in relation to a physical training, a new vocal score, and the understanding of the interdependence of the performers' craft and the staging of the play. But the everyday practice of Pieśń Kozła's actors now involved fine tuning their ears to words as a musical force, and to finding new and unusual ways of communicating them to an audience. Through this process *Macbeth* of its own accord revealed hidden meanings which on a cursory reading and through only logical understanding can be neither seen nor heard.



Macbeth. Photos by Krzysztof Bieliński

There were two distinct stages of work on *Macbeth*. The first was the creation of a work-in-progress for the “Complete Works” season at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2007. The musical reference point was Siberian polyphonic songs. Though it was extremely well received, the company felt that the strength of the Siberian polyphony had dominated Shakespeare’s language and they began a new search for music which would work together with language of *Macbeth* and give it space to live, breath, and be heard. This marked the beginning of an ongoing artistic collaboration with Corsican composer Jean-Claude Acquaviva and his group *Afiletta*. The subtlety of their polyphonic singing, and the attendant single-focused concentration and simplicity of the members of the *Afiletta* group was a major inspiration for Pieśń Kozła’s actors to search for even deeper listening to the musicality and emotionality of Shakespeare’s text.

Pieśń Kozła’s current performance, [*Songs of Lear*](#), premiered in 2012 and has received international acclaim. It is a nonlinear performance, almost like an oratorio in which twelve songs express the key metaphors and events in the drama of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. There are ten performers: five women and five men in simple, contemporary black costumes; a musician; and a narrator/conductor. The instruments consist of a squeezebox, a west African harp, a set of drums, and Polish bagpipes. *Songs of Lear* uses original compositions by Jean-Claude Acquaviva based on the liturgical polyphonic choral tradition, which represent the world of the the court, the kingdom, and harmony. They collide with Maciej Rychly’s visceral compositions of songs written in Egyptian Coptic and taken from the so-called “heretic” [*Gospel of St. Thomas*](#) (also known as “Doubting Thomas”). The Coptic music brings a break in the harmony, and introduces the drama and tragedy. There is a narrator who introduces the audiences into the landscape of each consecutive song, and even the few original lines of Shakespeare’s text which are spoken by the actors are woven into the architecture of the musical construction. Whereas in previous performances the actors of Pieśń Kozła have created very dynamic physical language which coordinates with their singing, the physicality of *Songs of Lear* is extremely subtle and very internal. Gestures and movements are minimal. Spatial arrangements reflect the dramatic relationships between the protagonists, and the voices and songs “paint” the pictures of the drama.

The company is currently working on [*Portraits of the Cherry Orchard*](#), based [Anton Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*](#), which premiered in June 2013.

Anna Zubrzycki is the co-founder and co-artistic director, with Grzegorz Bral, of Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre). She is also the vocal techniques teacher for the troupe and was artistic director of the 2012 Brave Festival. Zubrzycki began her acting career in 1975 with the Theater-in-Education Jigsaw Company in Canberra, Australia. From 1977 to 1992 she was a member of the Gardzienice Theater Association, performing leading roles in all its productions. She is the recipient of the Polish Theatre Critics’ Prize for Best Female Role twice, once for Isolde in *Carmina Burana* at Gardzienice, and once for Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* at Song of the Goat. In addition, she is a founding member of the Polish branch of the Rokpa International Charity and has helped to set up soup kitchens in Poland as well as traveling to Tibet to monitor its projects.